

Ward Choir Director

Part III: Picking Repertoire

CJ Madsen – October 13, 2020

Disclaimer: This is “Ward Choir Director According to CJ”, not doctrine. I have seen these principles work in multiple wards and situations, but every ward is different. Build on this in finding tailored solutions in your own ward.

So you’ve been called as ward choir director, and you’ve been inviting people to come like crazy. Now what? Now we begin getting to the nitty-gritty of leading a ward choir – where the principles of truth you’re following are more common-sense principles of choral directing rather than gospel principles. One of the first things to decide is what to sing.

What kind of music should my choir sing?

Chapter 19 of the Church’s General Handbook gives these guidelines:

- Church choirs are encouraged to use the hymnbook as their basic resource because the hymns teach the truths of the restored gospel.
- Hymn arrangements and other appropriate choral works may also be used.
- Texts should be doctrinally correct.
- Secular music and some religiously-oriented music presented in a popular style is not appropriate for sacrament meetings.
- Much sacred music that is suitable for concerts and recitals is not appropriate for a Latter-day Saint worship service.

The main principle is “Good, better, best.” The question isn’t “Is this song appropriate, period?” The question is “Is this song appropriate and the best choice for a sacred sacrament meeting?”

In my experience, you can’t have better success than singing a hymn or a Primary song that testifies of Christ. Other possibilities songs that have a similar character to hymn/Primary songs and, as mentioned, have doctrinally-correct texts. In all cases, make sure you submit the songs to the ward music chairman for approval beforehand. It’s the most considerate to send along to the chairman audio recordings and PDFs of the music in addition to the names of the pieces, especially for less-familiar songs.

A few last points on this matter that I saw effective in my most-recent time as choir director in a married student ward:

- Doing an arrangement of a sacrament hymn is VERY effective. I rarely see musical numbers of sacrament hymns, but when I have, it has usually been one of the most powerful experiences I have had with music in sacrament meeting.
- Figure out what dates your choir is singing, and pick a song that fits with that week's reading in *Come, Follow Me*. For example, last year my ward choir sang "Behold, the Great Redeemer Die" for our June song because it was the week we were studying the Crucifixion in the New Testament.
- Instead of you choosing the hymns, ask for suggestions from your choir! Few things will motivate a choir member to come than knowing that the choir is going to sing their favorite hymn.

How often should your choir sing?

The injunction from the Church General Handbook is at least once a month. Ideally the ward choir is rehearsing weekly. If this is occurring, I have seen in my experience that singing once or twice a month is best. If the choir is singing in Easter or Christmas, follow the directions from the bishopric. The more songs that are requested, the easier the difficulty level should be. For example, if you're asked to provide four songs for the Christmas program, doing four Mack Wilberg arrangements is a bad bad idea. Better to do one or two of the songs all unison or something simple.

How hard should the song's difficulty level be?

The key here is the phrase my wife and I use to help encourage each other: "Comfort Zone + 1." Pick music that will stretch the choir but not overwhelm them. The following questions can help guide you as you choose:

- How familiar is the hymn? The less familiar the hymn, the longer it will take to learn.
- How many parts are there in the arrangement? In my experience, doing any piece of music that goes into more than four parts at a time is too much for a typical ward choir. (This therefore excludes the majority of Mack Wilberg's arrangements – they're awesome for the Tabernacle Choir but rarely suitable for ward choir because they split too much.) Even four-part splits might be too much for your ward choir – I would avoid arrangements that are four-part

harmony throughout the entire piece simply because it's a lot for choirs to learn and make beautiful in a short amount of time.

- What is the range for each vocal part? In general, you want pieces that stay in the following ranges: (C4 is middle C.)
 - Soprano: C4-G5 (octave and a half)
 - Alto: G3-D5 (octave and a half)
 - Tenor: C3-F4 (octave and a half)
 - Bass: F2-C4 (octave and a half)

Use prudence and a knowledge of your choir to determine when to go outside these range guidelines

- Do you want to sing the piece memorized? Singing memorized brings huge musical and spiritual rewards, but it takes longer to memorize.
- What are the forces at your disposal? Don't pick a piece very guy-heavy if you only have two men coming to ward choir.
- Don't hesitate to pick a hard piece and then make lots of cuts/edits to fit your ensemble better. For example, consider having the guys all sing the bass part in an SATB verse, especially if the bass part doesn't go too low.

Where can I find music?

The following are resources you can use to find appropriate pieces for your choir free of charge:

- Sing straight out of the hymnbook! Or, if you have a choir pianist who can make up arrangements on the piano, have them come up with a fancy improvised accompaniment that builds on the hymnbook parts.
- Compose/arrange a piece yourself or with help from someone in your ward. Or ask a composer in your ward to arrange a piece for choir.
- Check to see if your ward or stake has a music library – most of them have a collection of already-purchased choral music, free to check out and use.
- [Ward choir arrangements by Ron Staheli](#) – the great “Masterful Choral Conducting” professor himself has spent several recent years making easy, singable ward choir
- [Choral arrangements on the Church's website](#) – these are awesome arrangements provided free of charge on the Church's website.
- [BYU library](#) – A HUGE library of resources and website links for ward choir music, provided by the BYU Library.